

CHRIS KUZNESKI

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THRØNE

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The Lost Throne
by
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Prologue

Christmas Day, 1890

Piazza della Santa Carità

Naples, Italy

The greatest secret of Ancient Greece was silenced by a death in Italy.

Not a shooting or a stabbing or a murder of any kind – although dozens of those would occur later – but a good old-fashioned death. One minute the man was strolling across the Piazza della Santa Carità, pondering the significance of his discovery; the next he was sprawled on his stomach in the middle of the cold square. People rushed to his side, hoping to help him to his feet, but one look at his gaunt face told them that he needed medical attention.

Two policemen on horseback were flagged down, and they rushed him to the closest hospital where he slipped in and out of consciousness for the next hour. They asked him his name, but he couldn't answer. His condition had stolen his ability to speak.

The man wore a fancy suit and overcoat, both of which revealed his status. His hair was thin and grey, suggesting a man in his sixties. A bushy moustache covered his upper lip.

Doctors probed his clothes, searching for identification, but found nothing of value. No papers. No wallet. No money. If they had only looked closer, they might have noticed the secret pocket sewn into the lining of his coat, and the mystery would have ended there. But as hospital policy dictated, no identification meant no treatment. Not even on Christmas morning.

With few options, the police took him to the local station house, an ancient building made of brick and stone that would shelter him from the bitter winds of the Tyrrhenian Sea. They fed him broth and let him rest on a cot in an open cell, hoping he would regain his voice.

In time, he regained several.

Starting with a whisper that barely rose above the level of his breath, the sound slowly increased, building to a crescendo that could be heard by the two officers in the next room. They hurried down the corridor, expecting to find the stranger fully awake and willing to answer their questions. Instead they saw a man in a semi-catatonic state who was babbling in his sleep.

His eyes were closed and his body was rigid, yet his lips were forming words.

One of the officers made the sign of the cross and said a short prayer while the other ran for a pencil and paper. When he returned, he pulled a chair up to the cot and tried to take notes in a small journal. Maybe they'd get an address. Or if they were really

lucky, maybe even a name. But they got none of those things. In fact, all they got was more confused.

The first words spoken were German. Then French. Then Portuguese. Before long he was mixing several languages in the same sentence. Dutch followed by Spanish and Latin. English layered with Greek and Russian. Every once in a while he said something in Italian, but the words were so random and his accent so thick they made little sense. Still, the officer transcribed everything he could and before long he noticed some repetition. One word seemed to be repeated over and over. Not only in Italian but in other languages as well.

Il trono. Le trône. El trono.

The throne.

This went on for several minutes. Language after language from one man's mouth. Like the devil speaking in tongues. Then, just as quickly as it had started, it stopped.

No more words. No more clues.

The man would never speak again.

Two days later, after he had been identified, newspapers round the globe reported his death. Yet there was no mention of his strange behaviour. Nothing about his ramblings or the throne he kept describing. Instead, reporters focused on the colourful details of his life – his wealth, his accomplishments, his discoveries –. A all the things that had made him famous.

Of course, if they had known the truth about his

final days, what he had finally found out after years of searching, they would have written a very different story.

One of fire, deception, and ancient gold.

One that wouldn't have an ending for two more centuries.

I

Present Day

Saturday, 17 May

Metéora, Greece

The monk felt the wind on his face as he plummeted to his death, a journey that started with a scream and ended with a thud.

Moments before, he had been standing near the railing of the Moni Agia Triada, the Monastery of the Holy Trinity. It was one of six monasteries perched on natural rock pillars near the Pindus Mountains in central Greece. Known for their breathtaking architecture, the monasteries had been built 2,000 feet in the air with one purpose in mind: protection.

But on this night, their sanctity had been breached.

The intruders had crossed the valley and climbed the hillside with silent precision. They carried no guns or artillery, preferring the weapons of their ancestors. Swords stored in scabbards were strapped to their backs. Daggers in leather sheaths hung from their hips. Bronze helmets covered their entire heads except for their eyes and mouths.

Centuries ago the final leg of their mission would have been far more treacherous, requiring chisels and

ropes to scale the rock face. But that was no longer the case – not since 140 steps had been carved into the sandstone, leading to the entrance of Holy Trinity. Its front gate was ten feet high and made of thick wood, yet they breached it easily and slipped inside, spreading through the compound like a deadly plague.

The first to die was the lookout who, instead of doing his job, had been staring at the twinkling lights of Kalampáka, the small city that rested at the base of the plateau. Sadly, it was the last mistake he ever made. No questions were asked, no quarter was given. One minute he was pondering the meaning of life, the next his life was over.

No bullets. No blades. Just gravity and the rocks below.

One of the monks inside the church heard his scream and tried to warn the others, but before he could, the intruders had burst through both doors. Brandishing their swords, they forced all the monks into the centre of the room where the holy men were frisked and their hands were tied.

Seven monks in total. A mixture of young and old. Just as the intruders had expected.

For the next few minutes, the monks sat in silence on the hard wooden pews. Some of them closed their eyes and prayed to God for divine intervention. Others seemed reconciled to their fate. They knew the risks when they accepted this duty, what their brotherhood had endured and protected for centuries.

They were the keepers of the book. The chosen ones.

And soon they would be forced to die.

With the coldness of an executioner, the leader of the soldiers strode into the church. At first glance he looked like a moving work of art. Muscle stacked upon muscle in statuesque perfection. A gleaming blade in his grasp. Unlike the others who had entered before him, his helmet was topped with a plume of red horsehair, a crest that signified his rank.

To the monks, he was the face of death.

Without saying a word, he nodded to his men. They sprang into action, grabbing one of the monks and dragging him towards the stone altar. Orthodox tradition prevented the brethren from trimming their facial hair after receiving tonsure – a symbolic shaving of their heads – so his beard was long and grey, draping the front of his black cassock like a hairy bib.

‘What do you want from us?’ cried the monk as he was shoved to his knees. ‘We have done nothing wrong!’

The leader stepped forward. ‘You know why I’m here. I want the book.’

‘What book? I know nothing about a book!’

‘Then you are no use to me.’

He punctuated his statement with a flick of his sword, separating the monk from his head. For a split second the monk’s body didn’t move, somehow remaining upright as if no violence had occurred.

Then suddenly it slumped forward, spilling its contents onto the floor.

Head on the left. Body on the right. Blood everywhere.

The monks gasped at the sight.

‘Bring me another,’ the leader ordered. ‘One who wants to live.’

Sunday, 18 May

St Petersburg, Florida

The phone rang in the middle of the night, sometime between last call and breakfast. The time of night reserved for two things: emergencies and wrong numbers.

Jonathon Payne hoped it was the latter.

He rolled over in the hotel bed and reached for the nightstand knocking something to the floor in his dark room. He had no idea what it was and wasn't curious enough to find out. Still feeling the effects of his sleeping pill, he knew if he turned on a light he would be awake until dawn. Of that he was certain. He had always been a problem sleeper, an issue that had started long before his career in the military and had only got worse after.

Then again, years of combat can do that to a person.

And he had seen more than most.

Payne used to lead the MANIACs, an elite Special Forces unit comprised of the top soldiers from the **M**arines, **A**rmey, **N**avy, **A**ir Force, and **C**oast Guard. Whether it was personnel recovery, unconventional

warfare, or counter-guerrilla sabotage, the MANIACs were the best of the best. The bogeymen that no one talked about. The government's secret weapon.

Yet on this night, Payne wanted no part of his former life.

He just wanted to get some sleep.

'Hello?' he mumbled into the hotel phone, expecting the worst.

A dialling tone greeted him. It was soft and steady like radio static.

'Hello?' he repeated.

But the buzzing continued. As if no one had even called. As if he had imagined everything.

Payne grunted and hung up the phone, glad he could roll over and go back to sleep without anything to worry about. Thrilled it wasn't an emergency. He'd had too many of those when he was in the service. Hundreds of nights interrupted by news. Updates that were rarely positive.

So in his world, wrong numbers were a good thing. About the best thing possible.

Unfortunately, that wasn't the case here.

Several hours later Payne opened the hotel curtains and stepped on to his private veranda at the Renaissance Vinoy in downtown St Petersburg. Painted flamingo pink and recently restored to its former glory, the building was a stunning example of 1920s Mediterranean Revival architecture. The type of grand hotel that used to be found all over Florida yet

was quickly becoming extinct in the age of Disneyfication.

The bright sunlight warmed his face, and the sea breeze filled his lungs as he stared at the tropical waters of Tampa Bay, less than ten miles from many of the best beaches in America. Where the sand was white and the water was turquoise. Where dolphins frolicked in the surf. Born and raised in Pittsburgh, Payne rarely got to see dolphins in his home town – only when he went to the aquarium or when the Miami Dolphins played the Steelers at Heinz Field.

In many ways, Payne looked like an NFL player. He was 6 feet 4 inches tall, weighed 240 pounds, and was in remarkable shape for a man in his late thirties. Light brown hair, hazel eyes, and a world-class smile. His only physical flaws were the bullet holes and scars that decorated his body. Although he didn't view them as flaws. More like medals of honour because each one stood for something.

Of course, he couldn't tell their stories to most people because the details were classified, but all of the scars meant something to him. Like secret tattoos that no one knew about.

The droning of a small aircraft caught Payne's attention, and he watched it glide across the azure sky and touch down at Albert Whitted Airport, a two-runway facility on the scenic waterfront, a few blocks away. It was the type of airfield that handled banner towing and sightseeing tours. Not large

commuter jets. And certainly not the tactical fighters that he had observed during the last forty-eight hours. They required a lot more asphalt and much better pilots.

Every few months Payne visited US military installations around the world with his best friend and former MANIAC, David Jones. They were briefed on the latest equipment and offered their opinions to top brass on everything from training to tactics. Even though both soldiers were retired from active duty, they were still considered valuable assets by the Pentagon.

Part expert, part legend.

Their latest trip had brought them to Florida, where MacDill Air Force Base occupies a large peninsula in the middle of Tampa Bay – eight miles south of downtown Tampa and nine miles east of St Petersburg. All things considered, it wasn't a bad place to be stationed. Or to visit. Which is why Payne and Jones always looked forward to their next consulting trip.

They picked the destination and the military picked up the tab.

'Hey!' called a voice from below. 'You finally awake?'

Payne glanced down and saw David Jones standing on the sidewalk, staring up at him. Jones was 5 feet 9 inches tall and roughly forty pounds lighter than Payne. He had light brown skin, short black hair, and a thin nose that held his stylish sunglasses in place.

Sadly, the rest of his outfit wasn't nearly as fashionable: a green floral shirt, torn khaki cargo shorts, and a pair of flip-flops.

'I'm starving,' Jones said. 'You want to get some chow?'

'With you? Not if you're wearing *that*.'

'Why? What's wrong with it?'

'Honestly? It looks like Hawaiian camouflage.'

Jones frowned, trying to think of a retort. 'Yeah, well . . .'

'Well, what?'

'Maybe I'm looking to get *leid*.'

Payne laughed. It wasn't a bad comeback for a Sunday morning. 'I'll meet you in the lobby.'

Ten minutes later the duo was walking along Bayshore Drive. The temperature was in the mid-seventies with low humidity. Gentle waves lapped against the stone wall that lined the harbour while palm trees swayed in the breeze. Payne wore a golf shirt and shorts, an outfit considered dressy in Florida where many people wore T-shirts or no shirts at all.

As they turned onto Second Avenue NE towards the St Petersburg Pier, Payne and Jones spotted a parked trolley bus called the Looper. It was light blue and filled with tourists who were taking pictures of a tiny brick building with a red tiled roof. A senior-citizen tour guide, wearing a beige Panama hat and speaking with a southern drawl, explained the build-

ing's significance over the trolley's intercom system. They stopped to listen to his tale.

'You are looking at the fanciest public restroom in America, affectionately known as Little St Mary's. Built in 1927 by Henry Taylor, it is a scaled-down replica of St Mary Our Lady of Grace, the gorgeous church he built on Fourth Street that we'll be seeing soon. Both buildings are typical of the Romanesque Revival style, featuring several colours of brick, arched windows, and topped with a copper cupola. This one's approximately twenty feet high and fifty feet wide.'

Cameras clicked as the tour guide continued.

'As the legend goes, the local diocese offered Taylor a large sum of money to build the octagonal church that he finished in 1925. However, for reasons unknown, they chose not to pay him the full amount. Realizing that he couldn't win a fight with the Church, he opted to get revenge instead. At that time the city was taking bids to build a comfort station, a fancy term for bathroom, somewhere near the waterfront. Taylor made a ridiculously low bid, guaranteeing that he would get the project. From there, he used leftover materials from the church site and built the replica that you see before you, filling it with toilets instead of pews.'

The tour guide smiled. 'It was his way of saying that the Catholic Church was full of crap!'

Everyone laughed, including Payne and Jones, as the Looper pulled away from the curb and turned

towards the Vinoy. Meanwhile the duo remained, marvelling at the stone-carved columns and the elaborate tiled roof of Little St Mary's.

‘Remind me to go in there later,’ Jones said. ‘And I mean that literally.’

The Colombia Restaurant is the world's largest Spanish restaurant. Opened in 1905 in Ybor City, a historic district of Tampa where hand-rolled cigars and Cuban mojitos are ubiquitous, the Colombia has fifteen dining rooms and enough seating for 1,700 people. Throw in the kitchens and the wine cellar, and the restaurant occupies 52,000 square feet, filling an entire city block.

Payne and Jones had eaten there on many occasions – it was practically a requirement any time they visited MacDill AFB – and had been tempted to drive there for brunch. That was before they learned the Colombia had opened a St Petersburg branch within walking distance of their hotel. Built on the fourth floor of the Pier, an inverted five-storey pyramid filled with shops at the end of a quarter of a mile turnaround, the restaurant had the same menu as the original while offering 360-degree waterfront views.

The duo took their seats next to a massive window overlooking the bay and the airfield. Within seconds, water was poured and freshly baked Cuban bread was placed on the table. Jones wasted no time, tearing the flaky crust with his hands and stuffing a chunk into his mouth.

Payne laughed at the sight. 'Hungry?'

'Famished. I've been up since dawn. Damn seagulls woke me up.'

'Seagulls? I've seen you sleep through enemy fire.'

Jones shrugged. 'Have you ever heard those relaxation tapes where they play new-age music over whales humping and birds singing? Those things freak me out. No way in hell I could fall asleep to that. I'd lie there all night, counting grunts and squeaks . . . But give me the rumble of a turbine or the gentle patter of gunfire, and I'm out like a light.'

Payne smiled. 'You're one messed-up dude.'

'Me? Look who's talking! What time did you fall asleep? Or haven't you yet?'

'Actually, last night wasn't too bad. It would've been perfect if it wasn't for the damn phone. Woke me up in the middle of the night.'

'Anything important?'

'Who knows? They hung up before I could answer.'

'No caller ID?'

Payne shook his head. 'It was the hotel phone. At least I think it was. I was groggy.'

'Did you check your cell?'

'I tried but I had a slight problem.' He reached into his pocket and pulled out his phone. Both pieces of it. 'I was hoping you could fix it.'

Jones put down his bread and studied the device. He had majored in computer science at the Air Force Academy and was a whiz with electronics. 'How'd you manage this?'

‘I think I knocked it off the nightstand. But I’m not sure. I was sleeping.’

‘No big deal. It’s just the battery. Unfortunately, something is jamming the slot.’

‘I know. That’s why I brought it to the wizard. I figured you could work your magic.’

Jones grabbed a butter knife and went to work. Five minutes later it was fixed. He pushed the power button just to be sure, then put it on the table in front of Payne. ‘Good as new.’

‘Thanks! You just saved me a hundred bucks.’

‘Not really,’ he assured him. ‘I’m gonna eat more than that, and you’re paying.’

Jones flipped through his menu, searching for some of his favourite dishes: roasted pork loin à la Cubana, sliced eye round of beef stuffed with chorizo, and paella à la Valencia – a mixture of clams, chicken, pork, shrimp, scallops, and rice. Meanwhile Payne looked for lighter fare, settling on a pressed Cuban sandwich with a cup of Spanish bean soup.

The waiter came over to take their orders but before they could speak, Payne’s phone started to buzz. All three of them stared as it vibrated wildly, bumping against an empty plate which made a loud pinging sound. It was so loud that other diners turned and stared.

‘Sorry about that,’ Payne apologized. Cell-phone manners were a pet peeve of his, and he had just violated one of his major commandments. *No cell phones in restaurants.*

Without looking at the screen, he turned off the power and put it in his pocket.

And that's where it stayed for the next few hours as precious time ticked away.

Payne gave it no thought until their return trip to the hotel. Hoping to kill time while Jones left a donation inside Little St Mary's, Payne turned on his phone and waited for it to warm up.

Several hungry pelicans sat on a nearby railing, begging for handouts from the dozen fishermen who fished off the pier. A young boy felt sorry for the birds and tossed them some bait. Within seconds, five more pelicans swooped out of the sky and landed by their friends. All of them squawking for attention.

Smiling at the scene, Payne glanced at his screen and was surprised by the summary.

Seventeen missed calls. Three voicemails. One text message.

Damn. Something was wrong.

All his friends knew he was a reluctant cell-phone user, only carrying it for emergencies. Therefore seventeen calls were a big deal. Especially in one day.

Worried, he clicked through his options until he reached the list of missed calls. He scrolled through the numbers, looking for the source, but the same message appeared over and over.

Restricted.

Seventeen calls, seventeen restricted numbers.

‘Shit,’ he mumbled to himself, realizing what that meant. It was probably the government.

They were the masters of the blocked call. Always trying to conceal their identity.

The only question was, who? Payne had done consulting work for the Pentagon and every branch of the armed service, not to mention the FBI, CIA, and NSA. Of course, if those agencies were trying to reach him, they wouldn’t call seventeen times. They’d stalk him quietly and throw him into the back of a white van.

No, if he had to guess, he would have said the Air Force.

Not only was MacDill an air-force base, but it had paid for his trip to Florida. Maybe the generals wanted to get one more lecture out of him before he returned home.

‘What’s up?’ Jones asked as he left the restroom. ‘Did your phone break again?’

‘I wish. I had seventeen missed calls. All of them blocked.’

‘Fucking government.’

‘What about you? Any calls?’

Jones checked his phone. ‘Nope. *Nada.*’

‘That’s strange.’

‘Tell me about it. I’m used to booty calls, day and night.’

He laughed. ‘I was referring to MacDill, not McLovin.’

‘What time did they start?’

Payne scrolled through his screen. 'Let's see. First call was 3.59 a.m. Damn. Maybe my cell phone woke me after all. I could've sworn it was the room phone.'

'Any messages?'

He nodded. 'Three voice, one text.'

'Start with the text. You can read it now.'

The device looked tiny in his massive hands, yet somehow Payne clicked the appropriate buttons, dancing from screen to screen. The text was tough to read in the Florida sun, forcing him to shield his phone from the glare. But in time, he was able to read the message.

It was straightforward and unsigned.

The type of message that no one wants to receive.

This is not a prank. Life or death. Please call at once.

4

The stranger stood on the edge of the cliff and gasped at what he saw. Massive rock pillars sprang out of the earth like giant stone fingers, each of them rising several hundred feet from the valley below. Yet somehow the natural beauty of the scenery paled in comparison to the architectural wonder of Metéora, a site that hovered in the heavens like the throne of God.

He heard footsteps behind him but refused to shift his gaze from the Monastery of the Holy Trinity as the sun slipped behind the Pindus Mountains to the west.

Marcus Andropoulos, the man who approached, spoke with a local accent. ‘The monks who built this place climbed the rock with their bare hands then refused to leave until construction was finished. They stayed on top for many months, lifting supplies by rope during the day and sleeping in a cave at night.’

The stranger said nothing, still admiring the view.

Andropoulos stepped closer, tentative. ‘Eventually they built retractable wooden ladders that reached the crops they had planted in the fields below. Grapes, corn, potatoes. They even had sheep and cattle.’

The stranger tried to picture the ladders. They must have stretched for a quarter of a mile.

‘I don’t believe we’ve met,’ said the Greek. ‘My name is Marcus Andropoulos.’

‘Nick Dial,’ he said over his shoulder.

‘You’re an American, no? Are you a tourist?’

Dial shook his head. ‘What does *Metéora* mean?’

‘It is a local word. It means suspended in air. Originally there were twenty-four monasteries on the surrounding peaks. Many were destroyed during World War Two. Now only six remain.’

‘How old is this one?’

‘Fifteenth century,’ he answered, still trying to figure out who Dial was and why he was there. ‘Are you with the media?’

Dial laughed. ‘Definitely not. I can’t stand those guys.’

Andropoulos paused, thinking things through. If Dial wasn’t a journalist, how did he get past all the officers on the main road? ‘In that case, I think you need to leave.’

‘Because I hate the media? That seems kind of harsh.’

‘No, because this area is restricted. Didn’t you see the signs?’

Dial turned and stared at the man who was trying to throw him out.

Andropoulos was young and lanky, dressed in a cheap suit that was two sizes too small. His hands and wrists hung three inches beyond his sleeves – as though he had recently grown and didn’t have enough money to get a new wardrobe. Or visit a tailor. Or

get a haircut. Because his head was covered with dark curly hair that went over his ears and the back of his neck. Like a Greek afro.

Dial said, 'You seem to know a lot about this place. Are you a tour guide or something?'

Andropoulos reached into his pocket and pulled out his badge. 'I am definitely *something*. I am the NCB agent assigned to this case. In fact, I am in charge of the investigation.'

Dial smirked, then refocused his attention on the monastery. In this light its beige walls appeared to be glowing. Almost like amber. It was truly a remarkable sight.

'Please, Nick. Don't make me tell you again. It's time to leave.'

But Dial wasn't ready. He picked up a pebble and tossed it over the edge. It fell for several seconds yet never made a sound, swallowed by the chasm below. He whistled, impressed.

In all his years, he had never worked in such a difficult location.

Simply put, this crime scene was going to be a bitch.

Dial picked up a second pebble, slightly larger than the first, and leaned back to throw it. He hoped to test a theory about the valley. But before he could, the young officer grabbed his arm.

'I wouldn't throw that if I were you.'

'Really? Why not?'

'Because I'm in charge and I said so.'

Dial grinned. This was going to be fun. ‘And if I were you, I’d let go of my arm.’

‘Really? Why is that?’

He yanked his arm free and whipped out his identification. ‘Because I’m your boss.’

Nick Dial ran the Homicide Division at Interpol, the largest international crime-fighting organization in the world, which meant he dealt with death all over the globe. His job was to coordinate the flow of information between police departments any time a murder investigation crossed national boundaries. All told he was in charge of 186 member countries, filled with billions of people and hundreds of languages.

One of the biggest misconceptions about Interpol was their role in stopping crime. They seldom sent agents to investigate a case. Instead they used local offices called National Central Bureaus in the member countries. The NCBs monitored their territory and reported pertinent information to Interpol’s headquarters in Lyon, France. From there, facts were entered into a central database that could be accessed via Interpol’s computer network.

Unfortunately, that wasn’t always enough. Sometimes the head of a division (drugs, counterfeiting, terrorism, etc.) was forced to take control of a case. Possibly to cut through red tape. Or handle a border dispute. Or deal with international media. All the things that Nick Dial hated to do. In his line

of work, the only thing that mattered to him was *justice*. Correcting a wrong in the fairest way possible. That was the creed he had lived by when he was an investigator.

If he did that, all the other bullshit would take care of itself.

Then again, in a brutal case like this, was justice even feasible?

‘I apologize for my behaviour. I should have recognized your name,’ Andropoulos said. His face was bright red from embarrassment. ‘I didn’t expect anyone from France so soon.’

‘Well,’ Dial said, ‘I was on the continent, so I thought I’d drop by.’

Although he meant it as a joke, his comment was accurate. Dial had started the day on the other side of Europe where he had been awakened by news of the massacre. He had taken the first flight from France to Athens then had flown by helicopter to Metéora, which was in the northern district of Thessaly. In reality, he rarely took trips like that on a moment’s notice, but how often were a bunch of monks slaughtered in the middle of the night?

‘If you had called,’ Andropoulos said, ‘I would have been ready for you.’

Dial stopped. ‘What are you saying? You only work hard when your boss is watching?’

His face got redder. ‘No, I’m not saying that at all.’

‘Then what are you saying?’

Andropoulos stammered, ‘I . . . just, I would have been more ready for your visit.’

Dial tried not to smile. He was just busting the kid’s balls and would continue to do so until he learned more about him. Until then, he would have some fun at the young agent’s expense. ‘Speaking of my visit, I need somewhere to stay. Somewhere nice. And close. But not *too* close. I don’t want any dead monks falling on me.’

‘Yes, of course. I’ll find something for you in Kalampáka. It’s the city over the hill.’

Dial nodded but didn’t say a word.

Andropoulos stared at him, waiting, not sure what to do.

Finally, after several painful seconds, Dial shooed him away. ‘Go!’

The kid sprinted up the hill like he was being chased by wolves. Only then did Dial start to laugh, remembering how he had been treated by senior officers when he was a rookie cop – how they used to call him Nikki and made him feel like a piece of shit but later admitted that they were just trying to toughen him up. Dial wasn’t nearly as mean as they had been, but he still used some of their tactics. After all, their methods must have worked because a quarter of a century later Dial was the first American to run a division at Interpol.

It was an unbelievable honour from the European agency. But one he completely deserved.

Few investigators had the success that Dial had.

Anticipating the rugged terrain, he was wearing a short-sleeved shirt, blue jeans, and hiking boots. He reached into his pocket and pulled out his cell phone. It was equipped with a special antenna that allowed him to get a signal just about anywhere, which was necessary in his line of work. He needed to be reachable at all times from any country in the world. Not only to make decisions but to be briefed on the latest details of his case.

After punching in his office number, Dial lifted his phone and rested it on his chin. His massive, movie-star chin. Although he was in his mid-forties, he had a face that looked like it was chiselled out of granite. Clean lines, thick cheekbones, green eyes. Short black hair with just a hint of grey. Five o'clock shadow that arrived before noon. Not overly handsome, yet manly as hell. The type of guy who could star in an action movie or a Marlboro commercial.

A woman in one hand, a horse in the other, and a cigarette dangling from his mouth.

Except he didn't smoke, didn't have time to date, and liked his animals medium-rare.

Other than that, he sure as hell looked the part – thanks to his world-class chin.

'Hello,' said a French voice on the other end of Dial's phone, 'I'm not in right now because my boss is out of town. When he gets back, I'll get back. And not a moment before . . .'

Dial smiled at the greeting. Henri Toulon was the Assistant Director of the Homicide Division and a

notorious slacker. A wine-loving Frenchman who practically lived at the office yet spent half of the day avoiding work, Toulon was still an invaluable member of his Interpol team, mostly because he was the smartest person Dial worked with. Toulon had the ability to speak at length on every subject under the sun – whether it was history, sports, politics, or popular culture. Unfortunately, sometimes he talked for hours just to avoid his other responsibilities.

‘Hey, Henri, it’s Nick. I’m still waiting for your background information on *Metéora*. So give me a call when you wake up from your nap. Oh, and if you’re sleeping in my office, make sure you open a window. Last time I came back, the whole place smelled of booze.’

Dial laughed and hung up the phone.

If that didn’t light a fire under Toulon’s ass, nothing would.

Payne read the text message several times, not sure what to make of it. Normally he would've dismissed it as a joke – despite claims to the contrary – but for some reason it didn't feel like one. Seventeen calls that started in the middle of the night screamed of urgency, not hilarity.

Without saying a word, he handed the phone to Jones and waited for his opinion.

Jones read it once. Then again. Then aloud. 'This is not a prank. Life or death. Please call at once.' He paused for a moment, giving it some thought. 'What the hell?'

'My thoughts exactly.'

Jones clicked a few buttons, hoping to get additional information. 'It was sent from a restricted number. Unfortunately there's no way to tell if the message came from the same phone as all the calls. It probably did, but we can't tell for sure. At least not from your phone.'

'Meaning?'

'If I access the phone company's server, I can locate the number. Even if it's blocked.'

'Can you do that from Florida?'

Jones nodded. 'With a computer and an internet connection, I can do just about anything.'

'Well, that might not be necessary. I still haven't listened to my voicemail yet.'

'Hold on. Before you do I want to check something.' Jones scrolled to a different screen and studied the time of each missed call. He quickly noticed a pattern. 'Thirty minutes.'

'Excuse me?'

'Whoever it was called you every half hour. First call was 3.59 a.m. Next call was 4.30. Then 5.01. Then 5.29. And so on. All the way until 11.28.'

Payne grabbed the phone and looked at the times. The calls came approximately thirty minutes apart – except for an extra call at 9.14 a.m. 'Who would call that often?'

'Someone desperate.'

Payne glanced at the clock. It was nearly 1.00 p.m. Nothing for the last ninety minutes.

One phrase echoed in his brain.

Life or death.

He prayed that wasn't the reason the calls had stopped.

They spotted an empty bench near Little St Mary's where they could listen to the messages without any distractions. Jones had a pen in one hand and a windshield flyer he had grabbed off a parked car in the other, ready to write names, numbers, or anything he deemed important.

Payne turned on his speakerphone and hit play.

The first message was filled with static.

‘Jon, my . . . ame is . . . I was . . . your number by . . . er. He told . . . you . . . help. I am call . . . you . . . phone. I don’t know the . . . I’ll have to . . . back. Please, it’s urgent.’

Payne hit the save button so they could listen to it over and over. Unfortunately the quality of the sound didn’t improve during multiple attempts. Still, they learned some basic facts. The caller was a male with no detectable accent. He mentioned Payne by name, which meant it wasn’t a wrong number. And he stressed the urgency of the matter.

Not a lot to go on, but better than nothing.

The second message was recorded an hour later. And during that time, the static had worsened.

‘Jon, I . . . early. I apologize . . . but . . . death. Someone is . . . us. Hello? Can . . . hear me?’

Payne frowned. ‘Is that my static or his?’

‘Definitely his. Since you never answered the call, the message was recorded by the phone company on its server. So all the hissing and the dropped words are from his end.’

‘Does that help us pinpoint his location?’

‘Probably not,’ Jones answered. ‘He could be calling from a rural area with poor coverage, or he could be in a major city with bad weather. Or he could be using a crappy cell phone. There are simply too many variables.’

Payne shrugged. He’d figured as much.

‘Play it again,’ Jones said, ‘but concentrate on the second half.’

They listened to the message again. ‘Someone is . . . us. Hello? Can . . . hear me?’

Jones smiled. ‘Call me crazy, but I think he said, “Someone is after us.”’

Payne nodded in agreement. ‘I think you’re right. Of course, that leads us to the next question. Who is he with?’

‘No way of knowing. Not from what we’ve heard.’

‘So it could be his friend or his wife.’

‘Or kids.’

Payne frowned. ‘Great. Now we have to save an entire family.’

‘Or maybe, just maybe, he’s alone. For all we know, this guy is delusional.’

Payne shrugged. ‘Either way, here’s the final message. It was left at 11.28, right after you fixed my phone. It’s the call I ignored at lunch.’

He pushed the button and listened to the caller.

Static was no longer a problem, yet somehow the call sounded distant. Muffled.

‘Sorry, I had to switch phones. I’m using a pay-phone now. Hopefully no one is listening. I will keep calling as long as I can, but I’m being watched . . . Damn! Where are you? Your friend assured me that I could trust you. Please. We need your help.’

They listened to it twice more before commenting.

Jones said, ‘He used the word *we*, so we’re definitely

dealing with more than one person. Unfortunately, I can't tell if your friend, whoever that is, is part of the we.'

'My guess is no. If my friend was there, he'd be calling me himself.'

'Unless he's hurt. Or being held captive.'

'Great.'

'Any idea which friend?'

Payne shook his head. 'Clueless. No idea at all.'

'Well, what time did—'

'Hold up,' Payne said, interrupting him. He clicked a few buttons on his phone until the first message was ready to play. 'I'm not sure, but he might've mentioned my friend in the first voicemail. It was garbled by static, but I think he did. Just listen.'

Payne hit play, focusing on the second sentence.

'Jon, my . . . ame is . . . I was . . . your number by . . . er. He told . . . you . . . help. I am call . . . you . . . phone. I don't know the . . . I'll have to . . . back. Please, it's urgent.'

Jones smiled, filling in the holes. 'I was *given* your number by *blank*. Something that ends with *er*. Like Miller. Or Harper. Know anyone like that who would give out your number?'

'Nothing rings a bell.'

'That's okay. No pressure. Give it some time. It'll come to you. It always does.'

Payne nodded half-heartedly. He appreciated Jones' confidence but realized time was of the essence. It

had been ninety minutes since the last call, an eternity in a life or death situation.

For all he knew, he was already too late.